

YOU GOTTA BELIEVE!

The Older Child Adoption & Permanency Movement, Inc.

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YOUTH HOMELESSNESS AND THE LACK OF ADOPTIVE AND OTHER PERMANENT PARENTAL PLANNING FOR TEENS IN FOSTER CARE: PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS THROUGH PARENTING

I would like to start out my discussion concerning youth homelessness and the lack of parental planning (i.e. a discharge from foster care to an adoptive or other permanent parent) for older foster children by pointing out the homeless youth problem we face right here in N.Y.C. which is true in many other parts of the Country as well:

- *The Coalition for the Homeless had reported to then Mayor Dinkins that 60% of the homeless in NYC Municipal Shelters have some history of foster care. (1)*
- *Shaffer and Canton found in their study "Runaway and Homeless Youth in N.Y.C." that 50% of the homeless young people who came to shelters had previously lived in a setting provided by the Child Welfare system; in a foster home, a group home, or other child care institution. (2)*
- *Out of 168 youth interviewed for a study at Covenant House, one of the few in N.Y.C., and the only youth shelter that accepted 18, 19, and 20 year olds, 27% reported having spent time with a foster parent and 43% reported spending time in foster group homes. (3)*

On a nationwide level, the following have been reported:

- *The National Association of Social Workers conducted a national survey of shelters for runaway and homeless youth and found that 38% of the youths surveyed had been in foster care at some time during the **previous** year alone. An additional 11% had arrived from another runaway or crisis shelter accounting for a total of 49% coming from some out-of-home facility in the previous year. (4)*
- *On January 6, 1991 the New York Times reported in a front page Sunday story that "a large and disproportionate number of the Nation's homeless are young people who have come out of foster care programs without the money, skills, or family support to make it on their own. (5)*
- *In a report prepared by the National Alliance to End Homelessness they found "there is an **over-representation** of people with a foster care history in the homeless population" and that homeless parents with a foster care history are three times more likely than homeless parents who did not grow up in foster care to have **their own children in foster care.** (6)*
- *In an analysis conducted by the Urban Institute, **61%** of homeless youth under the age of 20 reported having been placed in foster care, Group Home, or other Institution before the age of 18. (7)*

And what about youths due to be discharged from the foster care system? The Citizen's Committee for Children found this:

- *Forty-nine percent (49%) of the children with goals of independent living and nearing their discharge date, had no plan in their record indicating what their living arrangements would be upon discharge from the foster care system and that this was true for 58% of the boys.*
- *CCC also found that 65% of all youths living in foster homes with the goal of independent living had no plan for what their living arrangement would be upon discharged from foster care and that only 13% of their foster parents were identified as potential resources. (8)*

So, what does all this have to do with permanent relationships for teens via relationally planning for them before their discharge from foster care? Well, when one considers the plight of the young homeless noted above, and then one considers the plight of the nearly discharged foster child with the **permanency planning goal** of “Independent Living” or APPLA also noted above, one must begin to wonder what it is we are doing as a system to our children in the name of “**Child Welfare.**” We are, in actuality, creating half the homeless population in our City and our Country by not taking on the responsibility of finding permanent parents and families for these teens while they are still in our foster care. Let’s explore.

I. WORKING CLASS YOUTH IN FAMILIES VS FOSTER CARE YOUTH DISCHARGEES

WORKING CLASS YOUTH IN FAMILIES:

Child development theorists are now viewing adolescence in today’s society in two developmental stages: **stage one** from age 13 to 17 and **stage two** from ages 18 to 25 and beyond. The reasons are many-fold. Consider the following:

- *Our own, yours and my, anecdotal experience tells us that many young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 who come from fairly well off home environments and intact families, and who even manage to get through college, find themselves still living with their parents until their mid to late 20’s.*
- *To back up our own unempirical anecdotal experience consider an article that appeared on the front page of the Sunday New York Times on June 16, 1991 when it reported that 32% of single men (and 20% of single women) between the ages of **25 and 34** were living with their parents during the year preceding the article. (9).*
- *In another article in the Employment Press it was reported that in the northeast in the past 10 years the economy has completely shifted from an industrial one to a service orientated one. This transition has left almost all young men who are living in working class urban communities unemployed and unemployable. These young men do not even have the skills for the jobs available where they will eventually be able to work their way up to a decent \$30,000 per year middle class wage with benefits unless they are willing to go for training in traditionally “female” service industry jobs such as teaching, nursing, or secretarial type of positions.” (10)*
- *Also consider a recent book written by Christopher Jencks simply entitled The Homeless. The author identifies a very significant fact about the homeless:*

“When unmarried adults get into economic trouble, parents are usually their first line of defense against homelessness. 5.6 million unmarried working-age adults had incomes below \$2,500. Forty two percent of them lived with their parents, compared to only 9 percent of unmarried adults with income above \$30,000. The contrast leaves little doubt that the main reason unmarried adults live with their parents is economic. It also shows how important parents are in keeping younger adults off the street, especially today when the income differential between the young and their elders is widening.” (11)

So, why are these young adults, predominately working class but even many middle class, prolonging their adolescence by living with their parents well into their mid-to-late 20’s? Because they cannot possibly afford to live on the salaries they are making, assuming they are making any salary at all. Thank goodness they have parents and families to help out.

FOSTER CARE YOUTH DISCHARGEES:

Now lets compare the 18, 19, 20, or 21 year old foster care youth discharged from foster care, possibly with a high school diploma, but probably not, and having **no permanent parents in his or her life**. How is this youth – with no place to call home – going to survive in our society? Well let’s look at a survey published by the Foster Care Youth United that highlights some of the concerns and fears of the young people themselves who were still residing in foster care. Of the 12 youths who responded to the question **“If You Left Foster Care Tomorrow, What Would Be Your Biggest Worry?”** (12) Eight of them specifically expressed fears about their living situation in one way or another upon discharge from the system. Some of their responses were as follows:

- *“If I left the group home, my biggest worry would be ending up on the street with no job and no place to live.” Kiesha, age 18.*
- *“My biggest worry would be living my life. Once I’m out on the street, I’ll have no control over my reaction to circumstances beyond my control, and being that my life is my most important possession, losing control of it would be very frightful.” Mathew Dedewo, 18.*
- *“I guess my biggest worry would be how I’m going to support myself now that I’m on my own. And If I have a job that don’t pay me enough money for me to get my own apartment, where am I gonna live? How am I gonna find an apartment that rents for a low price?” Angi, 16*
- *“If I had to leave foster care tomorrow, my biggest worry be becoming homeless. That’s a fear that I’m sure people in foster care have. To wonder where I’m going to sleep and where my next meal is coming from and, most of all, wondering will I die on the streets.” Kenyetta Ivy, 18*
- *“My biggest worry would be finding a place to live, because if I got discharged I wouldn’t go back to my parents and most shelters are filled tight with people anyway.” Keith Saliski, 19.*
- *“my biggest worry would be getting a job and then an apartment.” Latrice, 19.*
- *“My biggest worry would be how to support myself and where I would go. This is why I don’t get too dependent on foster care and do things for myself.” Shaniqua Gray, 16.*
- *“If I left the group home, my biggest worry would be how I would survive without the help I need.”*

Consider also a recent documentary entitled *Aging Out* which aired on PBS stations across the United States on Thursday night May 26th, 2005. (13) The documentary features three stories about four youth aging out of care, capturing the tail end of their foster care stay and a period of time after they aged out of foster care to no one but themselves. Out of the four youth featured, two have already died (Risa Bejarano and David Griffin) while one of the other two youth (who happen to be married to each other) finds himself in harms way serving in Iraq.

So, what happens to youth upon their discharge from foster care? We fear that for far too many of them if it is not the local homeless shelter, it may be prison; if it is not drugs, it may be alcohol; if it is not prostitution, it may be hooking up with an abusive significant other; if it is not dying from homicide it may be dying from suicide; if its not psychiatric hospitalization, it may be hospitalization for life threatening diseases. We fear that for far too many of these young people, like Risa and David noted above, will die at way too young an age.

And these children would not be fairing well due solely to their “house”lessness. These children would not be fairing well because the child welfare system in our country had not taken it upon itself to help these children develop a lasting permanent parent and family in their lives while they were still in foster care. The system basically says to a child, “Oh, you’re 14? We’re not going to terminate your parents’ rights. You’re far too old for that sort of thing. We’ll just give you this fabulous goal of ‘Independent Living’ or “APPLA” and send you on your way when you are, say, 18, 19, 20, or 21.” This is the true source of half the homelessness in this City and Country. But before we go into how it is that the child welfare permanency planning goal of Independent Living or “APPLA” actually creates half the homelessness in this country, let us first explore some of the myths about why there are homeless on our streets to begin with.

II. Where Do the Homeless Come From? Some Common Myths.

Many of us have experienced what it is like to walk down the street in our respective neighborhoods or places of work and have to walk around, over, or through the living dead referred to as “the homeless” in our big cities. Many of us know what it is like not being able to walk a three block radius without being approached three or four times by different people begging for money. Some of us know the awkward feeling of walking down the street with our child and trying to explain why the homeless exist when the child asks us the innocent question “where do the homeless come from Daddy” like my daughter did one day walking to work together.

The general wisdom of most homeless “experts” is that the homeless exist for the following reasons:

1) **Unemployment:** People are homeless because of a lack of jobs. Though there is an element of truth to this, we still must ask the question “why does unemployment lead to the homelessness of any given individual?” We all know unemployed people who are not homeless.

2) **Poverty:** People are homeless because of overwhelming and oppressive poverty. Clearly there is an element of truth to this as well. But we must still ask “why does poverty lead to the homelessness of any given individual?” Most of us know poverty stricken people who are not homeless.

3) **Alcohol & Other Drug Addictions:** People are homeless because of their addictions and abuse of substances. Again, there is an element of truth to this, but we must still ask “why does addiction lead to the homelessness of any given individual?” Almost all of us know addicted people who are not homeless.

4) **Mental Illness:** People are homeless because of deinstitutionalization which leads to the homelessness of the mentally ill. And even though there is some truth to this, we still must ask “why is any given mentally ill person who might have been deinstitutionalized homeless?” Many of us know mentally ill people who are not homeless.

These four factors cited above and the four questions that followed them are extremely important because the answer to each of them is the same. The answer to each question noted above has been left out of every homelessness analysis ever done, even though the answer is the same for 100% of the homeless. And that answer, or most important factor when one considers homelessness, is:

5) **Lack of Relationships:** People are homeless because they have no functioning human relationships in their lives. It is not just their unemployment, poverty, addictions, or mental illnesses that make them homeless; it is any of these factors combined with the fact that they have no functioning human relationships in their lives, be it with a parent figured, spouse, adult child, close friend, or other family relationship.

This knowledge is disheartening because, as we noted earlier, half of this could have been prevented. Half the homeless could have had the opportunities that relationships bring had we not had a federally sanctioned, State and locally enforced “*permanency planning*” goal called “*Independent Living*” or APPLA that allows teenagers as young as 14 to sign their lives away to that **never ever** land of impermanency called “*Independent Living*.” “**Never ever**” because in this economy there is a high likelihood that these teens, upon discharge from the system, will **never ever** get a job or **never ever** find a permanent place to call home without a functioning human relationship recruited for them before their discharge from the foster care system.

III. INDEPENDENT LIVING Vs *INTERDEPENDENT* LIVING

This is where relationships are crucially important. Relational planning, or the developing of a permanent lasting relationship with at least one unconditionally committed claiming parent, is the primary hope for our older foster care youth. ***You Gotta Believe!*** is now beginning to turn aside the myth that there are no families who want to unconditionally claim older foster children as their own. There are many many families out there who want to parent teenage foster children. Many of them don't even have the youth move in until they already have turned 18. In addition to all the families we find who are unknown to the children that we ultimately place them with, there are also many families out there who are already in a child's life who would be willing to parent the child as well if they were approached in an appropriate and sensitive way.

This includes people who know the older foster child they want to parent – people such as the child's social worker, the child's school teacher, the child's paraprofessional, the child's volunteer, or the child's best friend's parent. We have made placements of children with all of the above as well as with their very own unexplored biological relatives such as aunts, grandparents, siblings, and cousins on **both** the maternal side and paternal side of the family. Melanie Tem, in a paper she delivered at a NACAC conference in 1985, wrote that even though “there is considerable support for the notion that most of us {people in Society in general} have ‘attachment’ problems to some degree” that we nonetheless know that “an individual who truly has no attachments does not survive.” (14) If there is one positive thing we can say about kids in foster care is that they are alive and they are survivors. Hence, you can't tell us that a youth who has lived to the ripe old age of 16, 17, 18, 19, or older does not have some attachments in his or her life who might be very responsive to learning more about bringing the child permanently into their home. And if the system would do away with its homelessness causing loophole it defines as a “*permanency planning goal*” for the child, “*Independent Living*”, it would be forced to come up with creative forms of recruitment like what we just mentioned and accept the responsibility of finding “**Interdependent Living**” relationships for all its children rather than “Independent Living.”

Perhaps the greatest line in Hillary Clinton's book **It Takes A Village** is the first line of the book that simply reads “children are not rugged individualists.” (15) This concept of “*Independent Living*” is a very upper class American creation that was hopefully never developed to apply to children or young adults who can not possibly survive on their own. The whole concept of “*Independent Living*” implies we should be raising our children, while they are still children, as rugged individualists. But who in this society can live “Independently”? Any why is that so desirable anyway? I'm a grown man well into his 50's and I can tell you that I have yet to have been discharged to “*Independent Living*.” I would have found it extremely difficult, if not impossible, raising a family on my own without the benefit of a second income. I always needed to live in an “**Interdependent**” relationship with my partner. And I have always lived in **Interdependent** relationships: with my parents until I was 25 and with my partner since I was 25. And when I fell upon financially hard times after a divorce, my parents were still there to help out.

So, what do we expect our older children in foster care to learn about “*Independent Living*” anyway? As far as I am concerned, for any working class youth living in any neighborhood to live “independently” in our big cities is close to impossible. This economy is **not good** for young people no matter how well it’s thriving for Wall Street. We need to teach our young people “**Interdependent Living**” skills and there is no better way to teach a child aging out of foster care to live **interdependently**, to live in relational growth with other human beings, than to find a permanent parent and family for each and every one of them **before** they are discharged from the foster care system.

IV. WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Child permanency advocates such as the Board, staff, and volunteers at *You Gotta Believe!* are beginning to change the attitudes of many child welfare professionals about the relationability of every teen and pre-teen in their foster care barring no one. In addition, however, we also need to recommend some systematic changes that will hopefully begin to change the structure of the system from one that currently allows for a “*permanency planning*” goal of “*Independent Living*” to one that will not consider discharging any child from its care without an “**interdependent living**” relationship with at least one unconditionally committed permanent parent.

1) **ABOLISH THE “PERMANENCY” GOAL OF INDEPENDENT LIVING!**

If a child has a goal of “*Independent Living*” this means that the child’s birthparents failure to plan for their future is so clear cut that the system changed the child’s goal to discharge to no one but themselves via the goal of “Independent Living.” If he is not going to return home to his birthparents, his birthparents’ rights should be terminated and he should be freed for adoption. The child should under no circumstances, as is permitted for 14 year olds in New York State, be allowed to sign a waiver stating he doesn’t want to be adopted and that he wants his permanency planning goal changed to “*Independent Living*.” This is akin to asking a child to sign his own homelessness warrant and, in some cases, to sign his own death warrant.

What can 14 year olds do in this society anyway?

- Can they sign a legally binding contract?
- Can they work at any job during the school year?
- Can they serve their country in a time of war?
- Can they vote?
- Can they go to a bar or local deli and buy a beer?
- Can they drive a car?

The answer to all of the above is, of course, **NO!!!!**

But can this same 14 year old sign a piece of paper stating that he does not want to be adopted, thereby having his permanency plan goal changed to “*Independent Living*,” thereby relieving the system of any responsibility to identify a permanent lasting **interdependent** relationship for him? The answer to this question is a resounding --- **YES!!!**

So, why does such a destructive permanency planning goal as “*Independent Living*” exist in the first place? Ironically, the answer to this question is: **Children’s Rights!!!** Yes. The theory goes that a child has a right **not** to be adopted. “No one should ever force a child to be adopted,” they say. **And, of course this is true.** It is just that we want every child to have the right to turn down Mr. And Mrs. Jones, not a nebulous abstract concept such as adoption. When we change the child’s goal to “*Independent Living*” we are saying to the child, “we are not even going to introduce Mr. and Mrs. Jones to you.” This family is the very family that would make a lifetime commitment to the youth and prevent the youth from becoming homeless upon his or her discharge from the foster care system.

It is natural and understandable for any child who has been bounced around the foster care system to say at 14 she doesn’t want to be adopted. Why should she invite potential pain and suffering? The system has trained her that she’s too old to be adopted anyway. Why should she actually believe she is adoptable? No one around her believes it. She must protect herself by stating she does not want to be “adopted.” But ask her if she wants to **belong** somewhere. Ask her if she will meet Mr. and Mrs. Jones. Her reply will be a lot different than if you ask her if she wants to be adopted. All children want to belong somewhere. **All human beings want to belong somewhere.**

However, if the child is not made available for adoption, we will never know whether, if we worked extra hard, would we be able to identify a permanent parent for him. Perhaps even the home of someone he already knows. Perhaps even a biological relative who simply would not present self as a resource or interfere in child’s life until the birthparents’ rights were terminated. I have had the experience of placing a number of children with biological relatives who have fallen into this category.

Indeed, in many ways “adoption” is both the best “*Independent Living*” and the best “*another planned permanent living arrangement*” program ever invented.

2) EVERY CHILD WITH A GOAL OF INDEPENDENT LIVING SHOULD BE FREED FOR ADOPTION NO MATTER WHAT THE CHILD’S AGE.

It is age discrimination at its most destructive worse when the child’s age influences the decision of the court or child welfare bureaucracy to not move forward toward the termination of a birthparents’ parental rights. If a child’s permanency goal is “*Independent Living*” rather than discharge to a birthparent, then there is no birthparent who is permanently planning for that child’s discharge from foster care.

This means the child is **legally** allowed to stay in a legal limbo. We technically can't find an adoptive home for the child because the child is not freed for adoption. Why do we not, then, at least free for adoption every child with a goal of "*Independent Living*" who is not ever going to be discharged to a birthparent? In this area we find usually very legalistic judges talking very much like the social workers they so often express much contempt for. Judges will ask "why should we terminate a parent's rights and disallow a child access to his birth parent when the child is very unlikely to get adopted." The judge will ask this question even in cases where the parents' failure to plan is so clear-cut that the child is going to age out of the foster care system to homelessness. The CATCH 22 is, of course, how can we get a child adopted if the child is not freed for adoption? However, in this one of the very few instances that our Family Court judges put down their legal gloves and view the case the way, say, a social worker might, they happen to have a very good point.

Why should any child be deprived of the right to see his birthparents simply because his birthparents' rights have been terminated? Who says that just because a parent's rights are terminated that a child cannot see his birthparents anymore, particularly if the child has no adoptive resources on the horizon? Well, children's rights advocates hear this! Its true, under the law as it stands now, a foster child does not have the right to see his birthparent after the parent's rights have been terminated, and this has got to change.

3) LAWS SHOULD BE CHANGED TO ALLOW FOSTER CHILDREN THE RIGHT TO SEE THEIR BIRTHPARENTS BETWEEN THE TIME OF TERMINATION AND ADOPTIVE PLACEMENT.

No birthparent should have the right to keep his or her child in a legal limbo that will ultimately lead to the child's homelessness. This is giving too much power and control to a person who has no right to such power and control due to their inability to plan for the child's future. However, does this mean that the reverse be true? Does this mean that the child should **not** have a right to see his birthparents solely because his parent's rights were terminated?

It should be every child's legal right, up to the time of an adoptive placement, and perhaps even after, that the child have access to his birthparents if **the child** so desires the relationship. Child Rights Activists should jump on the bandwagon to give children this right and to effectively advocate for their parents' rights to be terminated. This is the primary issue Law Guardians and Judges raise at termination hearings in cases where the birthparents' failure to plan is clear-cut. If the child has the right to see his parents after termination this issue would become moot. Let's give the child the power and control and not leave this power and control with a birthparent who cannot parent the child enough to plan for the child's future and prevent the child from becoming homeless upon discharge from the foster care system.

And, of course, it is wise, even after an adoptive placement, that every child that had communication with his or her biological relatives be allowed to continue this communications afterwards. It is virtually impossible, and highly inadvisable, to prevent any older child from having communication with people in his or her past life, particularly if these people are his biological relatives. After an excellent 30 hour pre-placement training, like our program requires before anyone ever adopts a teen, most prospective parents are in tune with this when it is safe for the child to have contact after a placement.

4) MAKE RECRUITING PERMANENT PARENTS & FAMILIES A CONDITION OF ANY FUNDING THAT IS GIVEN FOR ANY OF ACS'S PREPARING YOUTH FOR ADULTHOOD (PYA) PROGRAMS CONCURRENT PLANNING AT THE EXIT END OF THE SYSTEM

New York City's Administration for Children's Services recently released a *Child Welfare Services with Community Coalitions Concept Paper* in order to help frame and give purpose to the \$650,000,000 worth of Request for Proposals it expects to release in 2008 for the implementation of services to children and families in 2009. In this concept paper ACS did note that one of its major principles, goals, and expectation that will drive its design and delivery of services will include "*increasing the number of older adolescents who are discharged from foster care each year to families and improving the effectiveness of services to prepare youth for adulthood so they have the education and work skills that they need to achieve independent living.*" One of the City's major initiatives is a concept they are calling ***Preparing Youth For Adulthood (or PYA.)*** The goals of PYA for all youth before they are discharged from foster care include:

- **Youth will have permanent connections with caring adults.**
- **Youth will reside in stable living situations.**
- **Youth will be afforded opportunities to advance their education and personal development.**
- **Youth will be encouraged to take increasing responsibility for their work and life decisions, and their positive decisions are reinforced.**
- **Young people's individual needs will be met.**
- **Youth will have ongoing support after they age out of care. (16)**

Do you know how difficult all of the above goals will be to achieve for the average 18, 19, 20, or 21 year old with out a permanent unconditionally committed parent, ***a real parent***, in their corner who will remain committed to them long after their years in foster care are over? Having a "permanent connection with a caring adult" is a nice enough idea, but it's ***a real parent*** that will see to it that this "permanent connection" will stick long past the youth's years in foster care are over. Stating that youths "will reside in stable living situations" is a nice statement but having ***a real parent*** who will offer the youth a safety net long after their years in foster care are over is what will make it happen. Parents prevent homelessness. How can one possibly afford a youth the opportunity to receive advanced

education or personal development if there is not *a real parent* helping create those opportunities in a non-time pressured environment; just like the environment the rest of the youth in the United States of America live in if they did not happen to grow up in foster care? Who encourages and reinforces “youth to take increasing responsibility for their work and life decisions” if not *real parents*? Who will see to it that any young person’s “individual needs are met” if not *real parents*? And most of all, who will provide a youth with any “ongoing support after they age out of foster care” if not *real parents*?

The flaw, then, in this PYA concept paper is that it does not *mandate* the concurrent funding of a constant, on-going, never stopping, never ending, all out effort to recruit youth moral and legally adoptive parents until their very last day in foster care. Almost all of the good ideas PYA offers in its goals are offered in lieu of family. Almost all of the PYA goals above assume teens and young adults will not get parents and families before they age out of care. Parents and family are the **only answer** for these youth and we must make a commitment to never stop looking until that youth’s, or young adult’s, very last day in our care. We as a bureaucracy owe every child and youth that concurrent effort!

CONCLUSION

There is a clear-cut connection between youth homelessness and the lack of adoptive and other permanent parental planning for teens and pre-teens in foster care. There are issues that we outlined here that should be looked at into eliminating the bureaucratic and legal obstacles to finding teens permanent parents and families before they age out of care.

However, the major obstacle will continue to be the belief of almost everyone that finding permanent homes for teens is rare and that these teens are very hard, if not impossible, to place. People often want to know that their belief systems are right. People want to know that the things they believe in are, indeed, correct. This brings to mind a favorite quote of mine by Henry Ford:

*If you think you can – you can!
If you think you can’t – you can’t!
You’re always right!*

If you happen to believe teens are unrelatable, unfortunately you are right. If you happen to be in charge of planning for a teen’s future and you believe the teen is unrelatable and that a home cannot be found, then the teen becomes unrelatable and a home will not be found. But always please keep in mind a home was not found because that is what **you believe**.

On the other hand, if you happen to believe every teen you have planning responsibility for is relationable, then you are right too. If you believe this teen is relationable, a permanent parent and family can be found for that child. But always keep in mind that the reason the child got a permanent family was because that is what **you believed**.

The writer of this testimony believes in the relationability of all teens in foster care without exception. A family can be found for every child. I believed this because our program was able to recruit permanent parents and families for nearly 250 teenagers, average age of 16, during the past 7 years we have been placing teens and young adults for New York City. We became such advocates for the permanent placement of teens that we went out and started an agency that we refer to as “a movement” called **YOU GOTTA BELIEVE! THE OLDER CHILD ADOPTION & PERMANENCY MOVEMENT, Inc.** **YOU GOTTA BELIEVE** makes placements for any teen or young adult in foster care who needs a permanent family without regard to whether that child is freed for adoption or not. We simply believe that all children deserve permanent parents and families who will be there for them long after their years in foster care are over and we set out to find a home for every one of these youth who need one. And that is why it was essential for us to call our movement “You Gotta Believe!”

Believing is contagious. What you believe is always right. Why not choose to believe in the positive over the negative? It’s your choice. Choose to believe in the relationability of every teen and young adult and there will be a dramatic reduction in the homeless population in our City and Country. Fight to get rid of the goal of “independent living” so that the system is obligated to continuously find permanent parents for every youth up to the date of that youth’s discharge from the foster care system. Short of achieving this goal, fight for the inclusion of recruiting permanent parents and families as the single best way to *prepare youth for adulthood* when Request For Proposals are issued offering funding to service teens in the area of helping to plan for them long after their years in foster care are over.

And always remember:

**A
FAMILY
ISNOWHERE**

Do you see “A Family is No Where?” Or do you see “A Family is Now Here?” You see, we all can see the exact same thing but see something entirely different. That is why we at **YOU GOTTA BELIEVE** will always choose to believe and see that “A Family is Now Here” in every child’s life. Join us in believing and help our movement reduce the homeless population in half.

This testimony was written by Pat O’Brien, M.S., LMSW, Executive Director of You Gotta Believe! The Older Child Adoption & Permanency Movement, Inc. Pat can be reached at 1-718-372-3003 (e-mail, ygbpat@msn.com) if anyone is interested in speaking with him about the contents of this paper or about having Pat come to you town, committee, or agency to talk about the ideas he expressed in this paper.

NOTES

- 1) Coalition for the Homeless. 1989. Blueprint for Solving New York's Homeless Crisis. New York City: A Report to Mayor David Dinkins. Page 101.
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To learn more about the need for permanent parents for teens and young adults in foster care you can listen to our live radio call-in show "The Adopting Teens & Tweens Radio Forum" every Sunday evening from 8-9pm (Eastern Time) by logging on to www.am1240wgbg.com. If you happen to miss the live broadcast you can listen to past radio programs by clicking here: <http://www.am1240wgbg.com/Show%20Pages/TeensAndTweens/teens.htm> You can also watch a live-stream of our weekly cable access television show entitled "The Adopting Teens & Tweens Show" every Thursday at 12 noon and 8pm (Eastern Time) by logging on to <http://www.bricartsmedia.org/community-media/bcat-tv-network> and scroll down and click "Launch" under BCAT 2 Our e-mail address is ygbpat@msn.com Our address is You Gotta Believe, 1728 Mermaid Avenue, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11224. Our website is www.yougottabelieve.org.